



European journal of American studies Reviews 2012-1

Bolaki, Stella. *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction.*

Chrysavgi Papayianni



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9839>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Chrysavgi Papayianni, « Bolaki, Stella. *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction.* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2012-1, document 16, Online since 14 June 2012, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9839>

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.

Creative Commons License

Bolaki, Stella. Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction.

Chrysavgi Papayianni

REFERENCES

Amsterdam, N.Y: Rodopi, 2011. Pp284. ISBN: 789042033672

- 1 Dense and thoroughly researched, Stella Bolaki's *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction* attempts to "open up more space for debate around the Bildungsroman by examining its intersection with life-writing forms that seem unable to coexist harmoniously with it," as Bolaki mentions in her introduction (13). More specifically, the book focuses on four well-known ethnic American women writers and their stories of trauma, death, disrupted movement, marginality, enforced silence, to mention but a few, all of which eventually seem to call into question the conventionality of the Bildungsroman itself by writing, as DuPlessis has infamously remarked, "beyond the ending." If Bildungsroman stands by definition as a story of character –usually male– development and integration into the official norm, then, Bolaki's project of reading female authored, ethnic and postcolonial texts within the constraints imposed by the baggage of the Bildungsroman genre is more than interesting. In fact, some critics, Lisa Lowe among them, might claim that it is impossible given the integrative and universalizing power of a genre that has been largely viewed as *the* site for mainstream assimilation. Yet, as we see throughout the book, the interaction of the genre with stories, narratives, plots and elements that are intrinsic to contemporary ethnic literature may result in the subversion of the genre from within, especially as far

as its “compromising closure” (12) is concerned. In this sense, the novels examined here represent a potential site for the articulation of contemporary ethnic female identity through the construction of “hybrid spaces and borderland subjectivities” (15) that ultimately unsettle the Bildungsroman as the title of the book suggests.

- 2 Bolaki sets on her discussion with Jamaica Kincaid’s *At the Bottom of the River* and *Lucy*. The traumatic relationship between mother and daughter does not, as Bolaki wittingly illustrates, render movement and development unfeasible. Yet, it does render closure problematic. The “creative potential of loss” (36) examined in the chapter goes against Morettian definitions of loss as immobilizing. More specifically, in her exploration of tropes of motion and mobility in Kincaid Bolaki raises the question whether postcolonial mobility is “a form of empowerment, a traumatic experience or both” (47). To answer the question Bolaki uses the term “bound motion” in order to describe the complex, yet not impossible, relationship between trauma and movement, between trauma and empowerment that finally seems to redefine the genre. Within such a context, melancholia resulting from loss can be “politically significant rather than standing for a pathological act” (39) as the chapter rightly concludes.
- 3 Privacy and affiliation, or else individuality and community is the next pair of opposites Bolaki turns her attention to in the second chapter where she discusses Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*. Similar to her argumentation in the previous chapter, Bolaki tries to illustrate the dynamics of such a paradoxical combination. In *The House on Mango Street* individualism and community are in constant play, interrupting and simultaneously complementing each other illustrating thus the potentiality of such a contradictory blending. As we see, individualized expression is not incompatible with collective participation (116). Yet, while showing their potentiality Cisneros concurrently seems to problematize both ruthless individualism and oppressive community suggesting instead a “third space,” the house on Mango Street, where the ethnic can find a new form of expression, simultaneously united and divided. In this way, the traditional closure of the Bildungsroman is once again disrupted since being absorbed by the ethnic community is not, as it becomes clear in this chapter, the only option available in ethnic Bildungsroman. Such disruptions are important since “anything that cannot be easily accommodated can potentially become a source of resistance” (101).
- 4 Along the same lines, the idea that the ethnic Bildungsroman leads to an unavoidable closure, that of assimilation by the dominant culture, is further problematized in the third chapter as it becomes obvious from the analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston has been branded as a race traitor for her attempt to translate into English Chinese oral tales through her second-generation female protagonist in the novel. Using the trope of what she calls “cultural translation” as a process akin to that of “coming to America,” Bolaki sees this translation as similar to what in the first chapter she calls “bound motion,” namely as a complex and dynamic practice that moves beyond a mere exchange and assimilation into the dominant culture. Interestingly enough, she acquits the author of the traitor accusations since as she explains Kingston is able to engage in a process of resistant translation that claims both America and her ethnic heritage simultaneously.
- 5 The last chapter turns its attention to three works by Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, *The Cancer Journals*, and “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer.” In all of them Lorde resorts to “body building/building” (221) in an attempt to create a powerful body by looking for ways to move beyond pain, suffering, disability, immobility. Similarly to the

authors examined in the previous chapters, the disabled, deviant, scarred body is simultaneously a resistant body that affirms its right to be different. Bolaki aptly underlines how the “scarred and moribund body” is no longer “passive or static but constantly transforming,” paradoxically asserting its wholeness through its very fragmentation (235). Interestingly, this pairing of opposites, stemming mostly from transforming “a poetics of death” into an instrument of “knowledge, empowerment, activism and teaching” (234) once again disrupts the traditional Bildung which grounds its narrative of development on mobility and “normalcy.” The Bildungsroman is further challenged by Lorde’s assertion of the material body’s self-expression as opposed to the demands of socialization or assimilation traditionally enforced by stories of growing up.

- 6 All in all, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman* presents in a lucid and well sustained manner alternative stories of growing up and belonging that ultimately rewrite “Americaness” and challenge the idea of finished Bildung. The new concept of mobility proposed is very much part of the contemporary “art of living,” to use Bolaki’s words (237) since it allows one to interact with many cultures but not be absorbed by either of them. The inter-ethnic and comparative approach adopted is most certainly an asset as is the grounding of the discussion within a firm and well researched theoretical and conceptual framework. After all, Bolaki does manage to capture “the mutual and complex links between theory and literature,” as she mentions in her introduction (18).

AUTHOR

CHRYSAVGI PAPAYIANNI

University of Athens